

# THE ALPHA AND OMEGA

## Revelation 1:8

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"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:7).

**I**n Revelation 1:8, we come to the final verse of John's introduction to this remarkable book. The prologue gives useful information about Revelation, the most important of which is the purpose for which John is writing. There are many secondary purposes for Revelation, such as giving information about the future and exhorting the churches to which it was written. But the great purpose of Revelation is to provide Christians a view of history from God's perspective in heaven. As James M. Boice elaborated: "the primary purpose of Revelation is to enable Christians from every age and in every possible circumstance to view what is happening in history from God's point of view, rather than from man's, and to be comforted and strengthened by it to live for Christ and his glory at all times."<sup>1</sup>

It is by keeping this grand purpose for Revelation in mind that we can best understand the role of verse 8 in concluding John's prologue. I might seem strange, after all, that at the end of the apostle's introduction, God the Father himself speaks to the readers. This is more surprising when we note that the first person of the Godhead does not speak again in this long book until almost the end (21:5-8). Why, then, does John's prologue conclude: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'" (Rev. 1:8). The answer is that since Revelation presents God's view of history, it makes sense for God to present himself as the Sovereign who is able to hold all things together and accomplish all his purposes in Christ to save his people.

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 4:1.

## THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The question of the sovereignty of God is essential to all Christians but especially to those who are going through hard times. Boice asks: “Is God sovereign? Is he regulating affairs on earth today and at all times? Or are things somehow out of his control? Or in man’s hands? Or even controlled by the devil?”<sup>2</sup> The evidence suggests to many that God is not in control and, indeed, perhaps no one is. History, many argue, is like a roller-coaster off the rails, careening forward by chance and momentum towards a dangerous, unsettling, but nonetheless exciting future. Wasn’t it Jesus, after all, who said that history would involve wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, and more (Mt. 24:5-12)? One person penned a limerick that responds to these catastrophes with a pessimistic view of history:

God’s plan made a hopeful beginning,  
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.  
We trust that the story  
Will end in God’s glory  
But at present the other side’s winning.

This poem may be funny but its theology is dreadful. Boices point out: “If ‘the other side’s winning,’ we are all in deep trouble. But the other side is not. What Revelation teaches is that God is sovereign over all things, including the ups and downs of human history, and that he is indeed working out everything according to the council of his own inscrutable yet perfect will.”<sup>3</sup>

In a world like ours, we will often feel like the prophet Isaiah, when the righteous king Uzziah died. Isaiah was reeling over Israel’s loss and for the uncertainty of what would happen next. He did the right thing, however, by turning to God, entering into his temple. There, God gave the prophet the vision that his faith needed: “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isa. 6:1). Isaiah was reminded that God is the true sovereign over his people, and that while Uzziah may have vacated his throne God had not stepped off from his. The Lord is “high and lifted up” above the affairs of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 4:3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

earth, and as God's robe "filled the temple," there is no room for any other sovereign. Over all of history there is only one Lord and King, and that sovereign is God himself.

## THE ETERNITY OF GOD

Revelation 1:8 supports God's sovereignty with three statements, the first of which expresses the eternity of God: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God." The point is that God reigns over all, since he is before and after all things.

"The Alpha and the Omega" is a figure of speech called a *merism*. G. K. Beale writes that "a merism states polar opposites in order to highlight everything between the opposites."<sup>4</sup> As the Alpha and Omega, God is in control of everything in between. This statement echoes Isaiah 41:4, where God says: "Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he."

When we speak of God being eternal, we mean that his being exists outside of time and history, which God created. A. W. Tozer writes: "Because God lives in an everlasting now, He has no past and no future. When time-words occur in the Scriptures they refer to our time, not to His... Since God is uncreated, He is not Himself affected by that succession of consecutive changes we call time. God dwells in eternity but time dwells in God."<sup>5</sup> Peter therefore states that "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). Being eternal, God is One "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:8). William Barclay comments: "He has been the God of all who have trusted in him; he is the God in whom at this present moment we can put our trust; and there can be no event and no time in the future which can separate us from him."<sup>6</sup>

An analogy of a river may help us to understand God as eternal. We experience time the way that a boat travels down a stream: we are in the river, are only at one place at any one time, and can only see a short distance behind and ahead. But God has an aerial view that enables him to see the entire river at once. How knows every turn,

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<sup>4</sup> G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 199.

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961, reprint 1992), 61-2.

<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 44.

sees every narrows, and foresees every difficulty and danger. As the Alpha who started it, God knows where the river began and, as the Omega, he has ordained its destination. Likewise, everything that is, was, or will be is present to God at the same time and is subject to his rule. This is true of our individual lives, the whole of which God sees at once from beginning to end. The same is true for all of history. Beale writes: “The God who transcends time guides the entire course of history because he stands as sovereign over its beginning and its end.”<sup>7</sup> What better news could suffering Christians have than that God is “the Alpha and the Omega”?

## THE SELF-EXISTENCE OF GOD

**W**hen we study the attributes of God we find that they are all inter-related. Therefore, related to God’s eternity is another attribute of God highlighted in Revelation 1:8. Repeating a phrase from verse 4, God describes himself as the Alpha and Omega “who is and who was and who is to come.” These words reflect God’s eternity but the first of them especially declares God’s self-existence. He is the God “who is.” Not only does the eternal God have no beginning, but the self-existent God has no source of life other than himself.

God’s self-existence is highlighted in the Greek text, which begins verse 8 with the words *ego eimi*, “I am.” These words bring us to the burning bush, where God spoke to Moses. Moses asked for his name and God answered, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). In Hebrew, this is the tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters that make the name *Yahweh*, based on the verb “to be.” “Say this to the people of Israel,” God told Moses, “I AM has sent me to you” (Ex. 3:14).

The classic illustration of God’s self-existence is the one God gave Moses at the burning bush. Exodus 3:2 says, “the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.” This shows that God does not derive his life from any source; the fire burned in the bush, but the bush was not the source of the fire. The theological term for God’s self-existence is *aseity*. This word combines the Latin *a*, meaning “from,” and *se*, meaning “himself.” God is “from himself.” The Puritan Matthew Henry observed: “The greatest and best man in the world must say,

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<sup>7</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 199.

By the grace of God *I am what I am*; but God says absolutely – and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say – *I am that I am*.<sup>8</sup>

There are a number of implications from the self-existence of God, starting with his self-sufficiency. Philip Ryken says: “He does not have any unmet needs or unsatisfied desires. He does not need any help. He is not codependent. He is not living on borrowed time. He does not live or move or have his being in anyone except himself.”<sup>9</sup>

A second implication of God’s self-existence involves another attribute of God: his immutability. This means that God does not and cannot change. Being eternal, God’s being is not subject to any chain of events. Being self-sufficient, there is nothing outside of God that is able to cause him to change. Paul wrote, “For from him and to him and through him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). Therefore, having his life entirely from himself, the God “who is and who was and who is to come” always is, was, and will be exactly who he is.

The immutability of God provides more good news to suffering Christians like the believers to whom John was writing in Revelation. It means, first, that *God’s character does not change*. God is now exactly the same as he always has been and will be for all eternity. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and *unchangeable* in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” (Q/A 4, emphasis added). This means we can count on God always to be the same as he is revealed in the Bible. People often change and let us down. Their attitude towards us alters without a good reason. But God is always the same in his being, attitude, and purpose. Some people counter by arguing that the Bible shows God changing his attitude towards people. The answer is that while God responds to sin, faith, and obedience, he always responds to these in the same way. A. W. Tozer wrote: “What peace it brings to the Christian’s heart to realize that our heavenly Father never differs from himself. In coming to him at any time we need not wonder whether we shall find him in a receptive mood. He is always receptive to misery and need, as well as to love and faith... Today, this moment, he feels toward his creatures, toward babies, toward the

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (New York: Fleming Revell, n.d.) 1:284.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Discovering God in Stories from the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 94.

sick, the fallen, the sinful, exactly as he did when he sent his only begotten son into the world to die for mankind.”<sup>10</sup>

Along with God’s character, *God’s truth does not change*. J. I. Packer writes: “Men sometimes say things that they do not really mean, simply because they do not know their own mind; also, because their views change, they frequently find that they can no longer stand to things that they said in the past... The words of men are unstable things. But not so the words of God. They stand forever, as abidingly valid expressions of his mind and thought. No circumstances prompt him to recall them; no changes in his own thinking require him to amend them. Isaiah writes, ‘All flesh is grass... the grass withereth... but the word of our God shall stand for ever’ (Isa. 40:6).”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, *God’s purposes do not change*. Our plans change, simply because we do not know the future until it arrives and we often lack the ability to do what we intended. Not so with God! Isaiah 46:9-10 says: “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times thing not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

Since God’s purposes never change, his purposes for Jesus Christ will never change. The Bible says that God’s purpose is to enthrone his Son and glorify him forever (Ps. 2:6-7; Phil. 2:9-11). God has ordained his Son as the only Savior, and so the words of the apostle Peter will be true forever: “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). What folly it is, then, to resist Jesus Christ and withhold our faith from him, since God “put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22).

Not only will God’s plans for Christ never change, but his plans for his redeemed people will also never change. Paul wrote: “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:20). Christians are ordained by God to partake of the holiness of Christ, so it makes no sense for believers to live like they still belonged to the world. Paul stated that as children of God, believers are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17).

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<sup>10</sup> Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 82.

<sup>11</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 70.

As sovereign, eternal, and unchanging, God's salvation is also sovereign, eternal, and secure. Jesus said, "I give them eternal life... and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (Jn. 10:28-29). When God forgives through faith in Christ, he does so eternally and unchangingly, saying, "I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12).

Finally, since God's purposes never change, God's plans for the wicked will not change. Revelation shows that God will judge sinners who have not been forgiven. Exodus 34:7 says that God "does not leave the guilty unpunished," and the many judgments displayed in Revelation add living color to that assertion. God's unwavering wrath against sin gives a warning to anyone who refuses Jesus as Lord and Savior. A. W. Pink wrote: "Those who defy him, break his laws, have no concern for his glory, but live their lives as though he existed not, must not suppose that, when at the last they shall cry to him for mercy, [having rejected Jesus], he will alter his will, revoke his word, and rescind his awful threatenings... God hates sin, eternally hates it. Hence the *eternality* of the punishment of all who die in their sins."<sup>12</sup>

## THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

**I**n proving the sovereignty of God by means of his attributes, we have considered the eternity of God, together with his self-existence, self-sufficiency, and immutability: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:8). We might think there is nothing more to say on the matter, but God points out one more essential attribute that makes him sovereign over all things. Verse 8 adds an assertion of God's omnipotence, concluding, "the Almighty."

The Greek word translated as "Almighty," is *pantokrator*. This word combines *pantos*, for "all things," and *kratos*, which means both "might" and "dominion." Luke 1:51 uses *kratos* to say that God "has done mighty things with his arm," and 1 Timothy 6:16 uses it to exult God's "eternal dominion." For God to be the *pantokrator* is to exercise sovereign power and authority to rule all things, in all places, and at all times. Stephen Charnock elaborates: "As God is Lord, he hath a right to enact; as he is almighty, he hath a power to execute...:

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973, reprint 1993), 40.

in regard of his sovereignty, he hath a right to command all creatures; in regard of his almightiness, he hath power to make his commands be obeyed, or to punish men for the violation of them... This dominion is a right of making what he pleases, of possessing what he made, of disposing of what he doth possess... and to execute the manner wherein he resolves to dispose of his creatures.”<sup>13</sup>

A Bible story that depicts God as Almighty is that of Joseph, the beloved son of the patriarch Jacob. Joseph’s story may seem to display all that is unjust and instable in our world. His brothers disliked him and so betrayed Joseph. Sold as a slave in Egypt, he served faithfully but was wrongly imprisoned and in the darkness of a cell he expended his precious youth. Yet God was revealed as Almighty over these circumstances. A fellow prisoner, Pharaoh’s cup-bearer, was released from jail and commended Joseph to the ruler. When God enabled Joseph to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, Jacob’s son was installed as regent over the greatest nation in the world. In this almighty way, God both prepared Joseph for the role he was to play in God’s plan and also used Joseph to save his people from a famine and bring them into Egypt. Joseph himself explained God’s over-ruling sovereignty to his repentant brothers: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20).

Knowing the truth of God’s almighty and sovereign rule over all things brings the greatest comfort to suffering Christians like John’s audience in Revelation. How are we, in our turn, to meet the uncertainty, unfairness, and sorrows of this world of sin? The voices of existentialism and atheism assert that the only response is to derive whatever pleasure is available to us. For them, life is a tragedy without meaning. But for believers who know God as sovereign *pantokrator*, life possesses a great purpose beyond the trials and our knowledge of God’s eternal, unchanging, and almighty love fills us with comfort and joy. We look up from God’s Word with praise to him, crying with the host of heaven: “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign” (Rev. 11:17).

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1853, reprint 1997), 2:364



## THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

The book of Revelation brings a message of great solace to Christians, good news that is centered on the sovereignty of God over all things. This was the point that John Piper sought to make when he titled a book, *God Is the Gospel*.<sup>14</sup> The very truth of who God is provides good news for those who belong to him through faith.

We would never know that good news, however, unless God first spoke to us. This, too, is why Revelation 1:8 bears such good news, for in it God himself addresses his needy people: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” One reason why God speaks in this verse is to validate and verify everything that John will disclose in this apocalyptic letter to the churches. Only at the end of Revelation will God speak again, to declare his sovereign purpose and validate the message of the book: “And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Rev. 21:5).

When we think of God speaking, Christians should especially think of God’s revelation through his Son, Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1-2 say that while God formerly spoke by the prophets, “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” It is for this reason that when God says in Revelation 1:8, “I am,” Christians hear the voice of Jesus. God says, “I am the Alpha and Omega,” an expression that Jesus will apply to himself within this very chapter: “I am the first and the last, and the living one” (Rev. 1:17-18). We also hear the voice of Jesus’ great “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel:

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35);

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12);

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9);

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11);

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11:25).

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<sup>14</sup> John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (Jn. 15:5).

These “I am” statements show that Jesus Christ is one with the God who says in Revelation 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” This means that Jesus was present when Moses heard God speaking from the burning bush, giving his name, “I AM THAT I AM.” Exodus 3:2 says that “the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire” within the bush. The most likely explanation is that Moses saw the eternal Son of God in his preincarnate form, speaking with God’s voice. God likewise speaks, revealing himself to us as good news through his Son, Jesus.

In fact, the only way for you to come to know the great I AM, the sovereign, eternal, unchanging, and almighty God, is to believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). Have you met him the way that Moses met Christ at the burning bush? God called to Moses and he came, believed, and entered into a saving relationship with God. God now calls you through his Word. He says to you, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” the almighty sovereign who controls your destiny and offers you eternal life through faith in his Son. Jesus, the eternal, self-existent, and almighty God, says to you: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24).